

CAREER BRIEF #4: *Effective Public Speaking*

Picture this. You are standing behind the podium ready to make a presentation to 300 people in an auditorium. As you look out into the audience, what do you experience? Are there butterflies in your stomach? Tensed muscles? Perhaps even a cold sweat? If this has ever happened to you, do not feel alone. Even presentations before much smaller groups create major anxiety for most people. Are you aware that the number one fear is of public speaking, outranking fears of heights, spiders, snakes and even death? So, you might say that most people would rather die than make a speech.

Following are a few suggestions for how to manage your anxiety and be a more effective public speaker.

BE PREPARED The absolute best way to make yourself comfortable is to really know your material. Nothing is more stressful than trying to speak on a subject about which you know little. In preparing, you may want to make notes, but they should only be bullets and not a fully written script. The problem with scripted speeches is that if you lose your place on the page, you are in trouble. Also, you have a tendency to read a fully scripted speech and that can sound unnatural. The best practice is to develop a set of speaking points and speak from a place of knowledge, not memorization.

Another part of preparation is to be familiar with the audience you will be addressing. This allows you to give examples and make references that will be meaningful to your audience. You can also increase your comfort level by being familiar with the room in which you will be speaking.

GET ATTENTION Begin with something to get the attention of the audience. This could be a startling statement, statistic, or your own story. Come up with something clever, shocking, and right at the very beginning to engage your audience early.

STRUCTURE Plan your speech in advance. Don't have more than two or three main points, and preview in the beginning what those points will be. Have support for each point, such as examples or definitions.

TELL A STORY Include a personal experience that connects to your speech content and the audience will connect to you. You want the audience to link emotionally to what you are talking about, and personal experience does that. It is also okay to use humor in your speech. Not that you need to tell jokes, but try relaying humorous anecdotes. The safest way to use humor is to direct it at yourself, never toward someone else.

VISUAL AIDS To add interest and understanding include a visual aid. A visual aid could be a flip chart, PowerPoint© presentation, overhead projector slides, a handout, or a video. Make sure everyone can see it. Check the farthest seat from you and determine if you can read the visual from that seat. Introduce the visual properly rather than just

projecting it. Keep talking as you show the visual. You are still the main event and your visual is an aid. When you are finished with the visual, take it off the screen, so that the audience does not continue to focus on it as you continue your presentation. A word of caution, though, is that you need to be careful in your use of visuals. With PowerPoint© having become so accessible, there is a tendency for speakers to misuse this technology. Too many slides, with too much information jammed onto each slide, and coupled with a presenter who reads the slides to the audience can create a disastrous presentation.

BE ENERGETIC Vary your tone, volume and pace of speaking, so you avoid a monotone delivery. Get comfortable with periods of silence in your speech. This can help you avoid those awful filler phrases, such as “Um,” “Okay,” “You see?” Slow down or use repetition to make a dramatic point. Pause occasionally for effect. Don’t just stand behind the lectern, but move a step away when making a point.

AVOID DISTRACTIONS Be careful not to do anything that may distract your audience’s attention from your presentation. Large jewelry or an outlandish outfit may easily keep audiences from focusing on what you want to say. Also, pacing back and forth, jingling change in your pocket, clicking a pen, and any number of other behaviors can detract from your message.

INVOLVE YOUR AUDIENCE One of the most effective ways to give yourself a break and relieve the stress of public speaking is to involve your audience. With a very large audience, this can be challenging, but not impossible. Ask for a show of hands. Have participants turn to their neighbor and have a 1 or 2 minute discussion of a point you made. Pose a question and ask for a few participants to volunteer their answers. This takes the heat off of you for awhile and also makes the audience feel more connected to you, as the speaker.

EYE CONTACT Look at the audience as you speak. If it is a small group, you can look at each person in a short period of time. If it is a large audience, look at the audience in small “clumps” and move from one clump to another. One way to have good eye contact is not to read your speech. Use note cards that have key words written on them or use your PowerPoint© slides for your talking points.

CLOSING The way you close is as important as the way you began your speech. The audience may be restless at the end, and you have to find a way to tie it all together. So sum up everything and if appropriate, ask for questions. Repeat the question so everyone can hear, keep your responses short and never guess at an answer. Tell the person you will get back to them with the answer if you do not know it at that time. Think about your closing in advance. What message do you want to leave your audience with? End with a strong statement and then be quiet.

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT Prior to giving your presentation; spend some time practicing what you will say and how you will say it. You can practice before some trusted friends, colleagues, or family. If no one else is available, try it out with the family pet. Another very effective strategy is to visualize making the presentation. This is

where it may be particularly helpful to have seen the room in which you will be speaking in advance. The more realistic your visual image, the more effective it will be. Be sure to imagine that you do a dynamic presentation and receive loud applause from your audience.

And above all else, remain open to accepting opportunities to develop this essential skill. A wonderful resource for those desiring to fine tune their public speaking skills is an organization called “Toastmasters International.” This group has meetings worldwide, with 162 meetings in Maryland alone. The organization offers a safe, convenient (many meetings are at lunch time), and low-cost way to increase your comfort level as a public speaker. Check out their website: www.toastmasters.org. If they do not have a meeting near you, why not consider starting one at your worksite? However you decide to continue working on your public speaking skills, just remember...

Experience builds confidence, which is the key to being a good public speaker.

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